

a Sirish (*Albizia* spp.).

Except the *Albizia*, all other trees were standing within compounds. The number of nests on the krishnachuda tree were more than a thousand.

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## 22. THE MYSTERY OF "MASS SUICIDES" BY BIRDS

The ornithological catastrophes at Jatinga, Haflong and other remote areas of Assam have been known as far back as I can remember, though the first written record of the mass suicide of birds I can trace is by Salim Ali (1962) when he made a trip to the area with E.P. Gee. This was as a preliminary examination of possible sites for the capture and ringing of migratory birds. The same trip is referred to by Gee in his chapter on the Bird Mystery of Haflong in the WILDLIFE OF INDIA (1964) and to another place in the Cachar Hills by Rao and Zoranthanga (1979).

All required identical atmospheric conditions:

1. Dark nights, overcast with fog or mist and a little drizzle.
2. Gee added the additional information that the light at which they were caught had to be round and circular and not beamed like the light from an electric torch or the headlights of a car and the remains of birds which had been killed or caught were all of species resident in the area.

Then Sunjoy Monga and U. Rane (1986) visited the recently established holiday camp at Malshej Ghat on the edge of the Western Ghats with a party from BNHS and found a lot of resident birds hitting the eastern side of the bungalow and killing themselves by breaking their necks, legs or wings and allowing themselves to be captured by the locals for being eaten or for sale.

Except for a newspaper report by Chandrakant Dixit (1984) of a trip by Dr. Sengupta of the Zoological Survey of India, Monga was also the first observer to visit such a place when so many birds were killing themselves. He referred to a high wind and was able to obtain dead or wounded birds some of which were brought to Bombay for identification. The places in Assam had been visited by the

observers some time after the birds had killed themselves. There was much guess-work, but all along there appeared to be little doubt that though Salim Ali was still considering the capture and ringing of birds under these circumstances he had no evidence of any migrants being caught under these conditions. Though ducks and geese were seen at Haflong a little later, these were not birds getting captured at lights and there is reference only to flights high up in the sky going south. While writing of the same place after a joint trip with Salim Ali (Gee 1964) refers to birds going north. There seems to be little doubt that the movements are local and have nothing to do with migration on a large scale as has been believed all along.

All the birds captured both in Assam and Malshej were locally resident birds which must have moved short distances and the new factor of a high wind suggested cyclonic conditions further supported by the deep, long valley on one side and the high pinnacles on the other. Lavkumar Khacher (1978) refers to a teal so captured no doubt being forced down by the wind. Sunjoy Monga has drawn attention to several species obtained at Malshej which have been listed as Migrants and obtained apparently in breeding condition. The clause on my Checklist (1981) which states that the term migrant relates to the Konkan appears to have been overlooked, and it is possible that some of them nest east of the Ghats in the Deccan.

I also visited Malshej Ghat the same year (1984) with Sunjoy Monga and there is little doubt that a high wind was blowing for as we drove up the ghat road and were nearing the top, a stream which flowed down the side of hill and passed under the road was lifted off its bed and flung across the road on to the top of the car!

We have read or heard of hundreds or thousands

of birds meeting their end at Jatinga, Haflong. It is difficult to imagine what area was covered by this wind but the number of birds was certainly very large.

After my return to Bombay I have been turning over the whole matter in my mind but have not been able to decide on anything definite to put on record. Some time back however I mentioned this matter to Wg. Cdr. Qaiser Ali, who had recently retired from Air India. He mentioned that it was a well-known fact that all winds approaching a storm or whirlwind in the northern hemisphere, when given the right physical conditions blew in an anti-clock-wise direction. The evidence from Malshej Ghat showed when the wind got to the edge of the Ghat, it behaved

in this manner and the birds carried by it would make for the nearest lights which would be the only indication of safety to doves, quails, rails, and other ground loving birds. These would, if and when they missed the light and got swept beyond the edge of the Ghat, would redouble on their tracks and hit the lights from the opposite direction.

This seem to be a simple explanation of a mystery made more mysterious by planning from afar.

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### 23. COLOUR CHANGE OF TONGUE BY FAT-TAILED GECKO *EUBLEPHARIS MACULARIUS*

On 31 January 1994, while digging stones in Kamalnath Forest Block in Udaipur District for making a rubble masonry wall around a plantation, labourers noticed a strange animal under a stone. I was informed and I identified it as the Fat-Tailed Gecko *Eublepharis macularius*. It was a subadult individual, still possessing the characteristic coloration of an immature individual.

When I forced it to leave its hideout, it raised its body on all four legs and opened its mouth widely. I could see its tongue easily. Initially its colour was pinkish-white but soon its distal portion became deep-pink. The lower portion of its tongue remained normal, i.e. there was no change in colour. I caught

hold of the animal in my hands and observed the phenomenon carefully. The colour disappeared and re-appeared many times within five minutes.

This coloration may have been due to increased blood flow to the tongue tip. Perhaps this colour change of the tip of the tongue is a threatening posture of the animal.

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